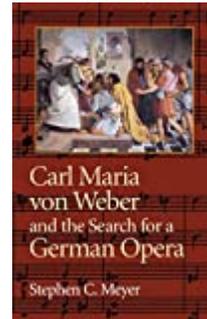




Stephen C. Meyer. *Carl Maria von Weber and the Search for a German Opera.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 253 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34185-3.



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Published on H-German (April, 2004)

Re-Imagining the Search for a German Opera

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While the eighteenth-century Italian and French operatic genres were firmly established and their *repertoires* performed well beyond the borders of their respective native countries, Germany, though rich in operatic performance, had not yet found a successfully distinctive operatic voice. The German linguistic area witnessed productions of various musico-dramatic forms in the German language under the genre-titles of *Oper*, *Operette*, and *Singspiel*.^[1] These more local productions are commonly characterized by their use of spoken dialogue and tended to draw on pre-existing operatic styles and genres. Although calls for a distinctly German operatic genre were voiced already during the 1760s, it was not until 1821 that Weber's *Der Freischuetz* was essentially hailed the "national German opera."

Stephen C. Meyer's book focuses on this critical point in history leading up to the creation of a national German opera. The main focus of his work lies in examining the relationship between theoretical and historical writings about the search for a "new German opera" and Weber's compositional responses to these ideas, namely his op-

eras *Der Freischuetz* (1821) and *Euryanthe* (1823) (p. 4). In order to fully appreciate the importance and intricacies in Meyer's work, one needs to keep in mind the German operatic ideal at the beginning of the nineteenth century: a unified art form in which music, drama, and staging become one—that which Wagner would eventually call the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. One of the questions that Meyer investigates is the reason for the tremendous success of *Der Freischuetz* in becoming the national opera, while *Euryanthe* in many ways fulfilled the German ideal more closely, but was a failure at the box office. In his collaborative approach to the topic, Meyer strikes a remarkable balance between historic and cultural sources relating to German nationalism, visual arts (paintings), and musico-dramatic analysis. As a result, this book is of interest to historians, German literature scholars, opera scholars, as well as musicologists.

In his first chapter, Meyer stresses the "connections between national ideology and the history of musical style" stating that "ultimately the search for a new German operatic form cannot be separated from the effort to articulate a new social and national ideology" (p. 20). The

idea of a new German opera is described using the writings of Herder and A. W. Marx. Meyer also explores the associations of the courtly aristocratic world with Italian *opera seria* and illustrates that this new German operatic genre is by definition in opposition to that of the *Ancien Regime*. The yearning for a new German opera was inextricably bound to the yearning for a new German nation, one in which increased power is given to the ever-expanding *Bildungsbuergertum*.

In order to “re-imagine” how audiences, critics, and Weber might have defined a German operatic genre, Meyer devotes his second chapter to discussing two model operas translated and adapted for the Dresden court during Weber’s tenure: Winter’s *Das unterbrochene Opferfest* and Mehul’s *Joseph*. The author’s analysis of varying performance versions of both operas is very carefully executed and once placed in a historical and cultural context, which Meyer does, it provides great insight into the definition of a German opera. In the case of *Das unterbrochene Opferfest*, substantial alterations to the genre and structure of the opera result in the omission of both comic characters as well as class differences, breaking down some of the key dualities of Italian opera. The German re-modelling by Weber, then, introduces a new duality: that of good and evil (pg. 49), which becomes one of the salient characteristics of *Der Freischuetz* and *Euryanthe*. With respect to *Joseph*, Meyer argues that its music and drama resonated with the emotional needs of its audience in their yearning for a new national community. Drawing on the writings of E. M. Arndt, which emphasize a united community shaped by the moral transformation of individuals, the revised ending of the opera, in particular, allows the work to follow “a progression from the private drama of sin and forgiveness to the national drama of reintegration” (p. 71).

In his third chapter, the author offers a fascinating analysis of Weber’s *Der Freischuetz*. Drawing on various early nineteenth-century writers such as D. Sanders, I. F. Mosel, and H. C. Koch, Meyer’s key to “unlocking” the meanings of the opera is one surrounding the notion of *Charakter*. Koch’s concept of “character” is one in which unity is created out of diversity—an issue that is central to the enterprise of creating a unified German opera (p. 77). Mosel’s multi-level discussion of “character” in opera functions in terms of the opera as a whole, its musical numbers, as well as the *dramatis personae*. The character of *Der Freischuetz* as a whole, “emerges precisely because the characters of the individual numbers and *handlende Personen* are so strongly differentiated from each other” (p. 85). Meyer then provides a network of opposi-

tions, sketching the various musico-dramatic characters as well as the spaces in which they exist. Perhaps the most brilliant and intriguing discussion concerns the geography of the opera—a central scene inside the Wolf’s Glen. The musico-dramatic interpretation of the hero descending into the underworld is discussed, as well as the notion that he “leaves behind not only light and warmth, but also, at least to some degree, melody.” The musical solution that Weber offers to set apart the underworld has attracted attention since the opera’s premiere and receives a very worthwhile analysis by the author. In the final pages of this chapter, Meyer makes the connection between the *Charakter* of *Der Freischuetz* and the character of the German nation (pp. 111-113 in particular). If anything, one might have hoped for a lengthier discussion on this very important connection.

The final chapter is devoted to Weber’s *Grosse romantische Oper, Euryanthe*. Meyer once again analyzes this opera using the concept of *Charakter*, which very effectively illustrates the differences and similarities between *Der Freischuetz* and *Euryanthe*. In the case of *Euryanthe*, however, Meyer adds another analytic dimension—the polar opposition between the sexes—which contributes not only to our understanding of the relationships between operatic characters, but it also serves as a platform to highlight a reason for *Euryanthe*’s failure. Although the main character, Euryanthe, embodies the ideal passive heroine filled with inner virtue, and her music is filled with the rhetoric of the *Bildungsbuergertum*, her “spotless virtue and inability to act robs her of her operatic nature” (p. 150). It appears then, that “gender ideology came into direct conflict with the musical and dramatic demands of the operatic stage” (p. 151), causing the opera to fail despite its efforts to embody the German through-composed operatic ideal.

The epilogue discusses a few significant developments in Dresden following the failure of *Euryanthe* and is useful in “placing” Weber’s *Der Freischuetz* and *Euryanthe* in a larger context, particularly in anticipation of Wagner’s arrival. Meyer also provides appendices with a synopsis for most of the operas discussed, which makes this book readily accessible to a wider audience. Overall, this book makes a significant contribution both to opera scholarship and to studies in music and German nationalism. Meyer’s book is fittingly dedicated to “the creative reimagination of the operatic past” (p. 175).

Note

[1]. For an excellent discussion on German opera during this period, see Thomas Baumann, *North German*

Opera in the Age of Goethe (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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Citation: Estelle Joubert. Review of Meyer, Stephen C., *Carl Maria von Weber and the Search for a German Opera*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2004.

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